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Indian Students and Politics

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THE relation between politics and students is one of the vexed questions of the day. There are two classes of people in India—those who believe that students should as a matter of duty take part in politics, and those who are of opinion that they should not. People frequently talk over the matter with me and ask for my opinion, knowing me to be interested in the subject, but I always tell them that their question cannot be answered off-hand. In the first place it seems to me to be necessary to know what is meant by politics, and then it is equally important to know the circumstances surrounding the student, and his age. Let us take these points one by one.

First, then, with regard to the definition of politics. Now the broadest definition I can think of is that politics is a science concerned with the means of promoting the general welfare of the state. It is a science (like any other science) with laws which, if brought into operation, produce certain definite effects. If we go no further than this I doubt whether there will be

any two opinions regarding the desirability of students taking part in politics, of their studying the laws which govern the prosperity of their country—provided, of course, that they are old enough to study with profit. We do not start the beginner in Algebra with Quadratic Equations, nor do we place before the young child, about to learn English, Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding*. We begin with the simple and thence proceed to the complex, and this is just what we should do in connection with politics.

Unfortunately, the word "politics" has acquired a different significance, and it is because of this that there is so much confusion at the present time. "Politics" has come to mean agitation, constitutional or otherwise, either against certain measures which the Government of the country has thought fit to adopt, or in favour of certain measures which the Government does not adopt and which the agitator thinks it *ought* to adopt. And either kind of agitation has come to involve in the minds of many the imputing of bad motives to the opposite party. Newspapers, pamphlets, books, are brought into play by both sides to hurl sarcasm, abuse and logic against the opposing forces, personalities are indulged in, and sooner or later the excitement thus produced threatens to become uncontrollable.

With this kind of politics I am very strongly of opinion that students should have nothing to do. Let me, however, hasten to add that I am by no

means of opinion that agitation is wrong, at all events constitutional agitation, agitation in which the law is made to work for the agitator, in which he takes advantage of existing forms to secure his ends ; so long as personalities are carefully avoided, together with the imputation of evil motives. In this way, indeed, the state makes progress, and the more honest agitation of this kind there is, the better for the people. But the point is that to agitate in this way necessitates knowledge, necessitates acquaintance with the forms of Government in this country and elsewhere, means an understanding of the condition of the people and of their requirements. There is no question of excitement in such agitation, but rather a calm, deliberate pressing of the needed reforms upon the attention of those in power, educating the masses to understand their needs, and guiding public opinion to express in no uncertain voice the lines along which the Government shall proceed. As for agitation by violence, I cannot believe that it will ever give prosperity to the people which adopts it—out of evil good cannot come, and violence is an insult to the harmony of nature.

Leaving this aside, let us go back to the question of constitutional agitation as a part of the definition of politics. The point at issue is: Are students justified in taking part in it? Ought they, as a matter of duty to their mother-country, to join in this method of procedure? If my explanation of the meaning of

constitutional agitation be correct, then I think the answer is an unhesitating "No". To agitate constitutionally means a knowledge of the constitution in the first place, in the second place a knowledge of the conditions of life, in the third place an understanding of the evils of existing forms and methods and of the reasons *why* they are evil, and in the fourth place a knowledge, based on the study of the history of the country in question and of the history of other countries, as to the most suitable remedies and the method of their application. Does any sensible person suggest that the mind of the student is sufficiently developed to undertake this stupendous task, or even the smallest part of it? Who would entrust the young medical student with a difficult surgical operation? And for the matter of that how many *men* are there in India to-day who by experience and study are fitted for such a burden? This brings me to the second and third points which I raised at the beginning of this article—the circumstances surrounding the student and the question as to his age.

Suppose for a moment that the student mixes himself up with the kind of agitation described above, what will be the result to himself and to others? Unless he has had time to give to study he will be forced to take *ready-made*, without question or examination, the opinions of others, probably of those as irresponsible as himself, and the more violent the opinion, the more will it appear palatable. Very naturally so, of course.

Youth is the age of violent enthusiasms, and it is right that it should be, but the enthusiasm must be directed into channels wherein there is but little possibility of its doing harm to other people or of springing back and inflicting injury on its possessor. In this way the enthusiasm of youth will gradually become tempered by the wisdom of maturity, and the two conjoined will serve as a powerful and admirable incentive to unselfish action. In politics, however, tempered enthusiasm cannot be looked for in youth. Indeed, we rarely find it among men of the world; and though the educated man may know what he is excited about, the youth will be excited without really understanding why—and nothing can be more injurious both intellectually and morally than unreasoning excitement.

But apart from the evil that may come to the young man himself, we must also take into consideration his surroundings. What effect will the plunge into politics have upon his relatives and friends, upon his College, upon his teachers? I do not lay so much stress, when talking to students, upon the fear lest they may ruin their future careers by playing with the political fire, because their generous hearts may revolt at the idea of placing their own personal material welfare before what they regard as the welfare of their country. That is a matter for the guardians and advisers to look to; it is for them to prevent the youthful misdirected ardour from injuring its possessor irretrievably—and this has to be done regardless of

the almost inevitable antagonism which will result. I put to the students rather the question: "Have you the right to endanger the prosperity and peace of your family by adopting a course which may be extremely injurious to them, until by study, age, and experience you can form matured judgment?" In the extreme case of the family as a whole approving of their young relative thus imperilling their status and future, or in the case of a young man without any family, then, provided he is of an age to understand more or less what he is doing, he is entitled to do what he thinks proper and must abide by the consequences: only, he should cease to remain a member of a College which his actions would necessarily compromise. But such cases are rare; for the most part the families are occupied in carrying on peaceable avocations on various lines, which may be seriously interfered with by a young man who engages in political agitation. Rightly or wrongly it will be assumed by those who are on the side of law and order that the home influences are unwise, that the youth is permitted to mix with undesirable associates, that the College in which he is studying encourages its young men to agitate, and the result will be that his relatives will—at the very least—experience mistrust and disapproval, while the work of the College will be hindered and its professors be regarded with suspicion. The question then arises as to whether any student should impose such a risk on

his family or allow the good work that his College may be doing to suffer through his action. Common-sense, it seems to me, very clearly says "No". For my own part I have never come across one single parent who has been willing that his son should mix himself up in political agitation of any kind, and I know well the obstacles which such action places in the way of the College of which the young man may happen to be a member. My own experience, therefore, leads me to the belief that a student has a very clearly defined duty to avoid participation in political agitation, a duty which he owes primarily to his family which has supported him since his birth and which is equipping him for life's struggle in the near future; secondarily to his College which exists for the purpose of helping him to the best of its ability, and whose professors and teachers are making every effort to be of service to him in his needs, and also to himself—for youth should spend in study the period of life naturally allotted to it, so as to develop those powers and capacities without which a young man cannot become a useful citizen of his mother country.

It would, indeed, be incomprehensible to me how any young man situated as above described could for a moment—knowing the difficulties to which he will expose those around him—take up so selfish a course, were it not for two facts: first, the ignorance of the student, and second, that there are

people in India who are past-masters in the art of tempting young men to neglect their relatives and their teachers for what they are pleased to call the glory of the service of the Motherland. Cunningly written articles in newspapers, soul-stirring speeches by irresponsible orators to audiences of which they know nothing, clever persuasions by professional agitators who rush through a town sowing seeds of discord and unrest, whose harvest must be reaped by the inhabitants, by the families and by the teachers—these are the ways in which the young man of the present day is tempted from the plain duty before him to engage in work which seems surrounded by a halo of glory and sacrifice strongly contrasted with the homely, less glittering and often seemingly humdrum and troublesome path of making himself a good son and of acquiring the knowledge which will enable him later on to decide as to the many momentous problems of political life. Natural it is that the temptation should prove too great for the students to withstand, natural that they should be led away by the attractiveness of the possibilities opened out before them and by the thought of becoming national heroes and even martyrs; but upon those who thus call them there is a very heavy responsibility. Are these people who incite the students to take action prepared for that responsibility? Have they even for a moment thought about it? Do they intend to support those families which may be ruined through

the action of young men who have listened to schemes which seem to promise so much but which are often so bitter in their fulfilment? Have they stopped to think of the harm they are doing in unsettling the minds of those who should be leading a quiet studious life, but on whose weak backs they are placing the burdens of strong men? I venture to say that they are making immeasurably difficult the duty, which lies upon those of us who are directly responsible for the education of the young, of instilling good principles and right motives; and, during the last few years, this duty has thus become more and more onerous, more anxious, and less successful in its performance. By all means let them ruin themselves, and if their ruin contributes towards the greater prosperity of their country—and I am prepared to admit freely that it sometimes may—then I honour and respect them for their self-sacrifice; but let them beware of allowing the ruin to fall upon such as barely know what they are doing, who have no business to be allowed to suffer when those responsible for their suffering escape unscathed.

After all, however, apart from these considerations, the main point in one sense is that the young man cannot possibly know more than the barest outline of political science, and the putting of political ideas by agitators into his hands is as if a child were given a surgical knife and told to perform an operation. The agitator does not seem to see that the very crudity

of the young man's efforts is as likely to do harm to his cause as to do good. The question then arises as to what policy those, whose aim is to educate the youth for his own benefit and for that of his country, should pursue as against the methods of people who use the young impressionable spirit without considering the injury which they may be inflicting upon it.

What are our ideals? What is the object of education? Does the patriotic Indian aspire to see his country under a system of Self-government? Of course he does, and who will blame him? Does he not wish as far as possible to alleviate misery, to establish prosperity and to create peace and harmony among all? We are all agreed as to this. But the way in which all these dreams are to be converted into living conditions of society is where differences of opinion will arise. I have tried to show the utter harmfulness of certain methods, and it remains for me to suggest what seem to me to be means by which our ideals may be realised.

Let me premise by stating that I conceive Indian Self-government to be in no degree incompatible with a prominent place among the component parts of the great Empire to which we all belong. I do not wish for a single moment to appear blind to the many faults which the British people possess. As an Englishman myself, I can see them very clearly. Nor do I for a moment deny that we make many

mistakes, from lack of understanding and from want of sympathy, in our government of India, and these have to be remedied sooner or later, or we shall fail in the trust which Providence has imposed upon us of guiding and helping our Indian brethren in the task of the formation of an Indian nation, or at least of a federation of nations within an Empire. This is a matter for the British people and its national conscience, and it is good that the national conscience should be pricked by those who know just when and in what manner it requires pricking. But while making due allowance for mistakes, there must be some great and world-affecting reason for the presence of the English in India. East and West, it would seem, are not to be entirely separated in the future; East is *not* to be East and West to be West, for there comes a time in the great evolution of races when each is to learn from the other not only those virtues which it lacks and which the other possesses, but also that it is the ultimate destiny of mankind regardless of creed or colour to live in peace and brotherhood. First in the small and then in the large is the great lesson of brotherhood learnt, and I believe that the great Empire to which we all belong is, as it were, an experiment by Providence in the direction of a brotherhood which one day we may hope to become universal. Therefore is it that while I look forward to the time when India shall become a nation in the true sense of the word, I

also hope that she may be able when that time comes to take her stand with many other nations—grouped together for peace and harmony.

What we are concerned with at present, however, is as to how best to prepare the coming generation to take an intelligent part in the work of their country's regeneration. I, for one, believe that this preparation should be begun in School and College, not by allowing the students to take part in definite political agitation, but by setting before them, gradually and according to their capacity to understand, the principles and history of government both in the past and at the present time. In the School Department, for example, I should prescribe a course of study which should include the main features of the history as far as known of the systems of government in ancient India, *e.g.*, the systems as described in *Manu* and as in vogue in the time of Akbar and of later rulers. To this should be added a brief outline of the present system of administration as adopted for the Government of India, together with a rough estimate of the position and duties of the Secretary of State for India and the India Council.

This would, I think, be sufficient for the average schoolboy and would probably cover a two years' course in the highest classes, for, together with this, there must, of course, be a syllabus of Indian and of English history, the former preferably by some Indian writer of experience and note.

Coming to the College Department we shall begin the really serious, and to a certain extent practical, study of politics. In the first place, with the help of extracts from a book such as *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (of which several volumes have already appeared) the teacher may expand the knowledge of administration already acquired in the School Department. The rough sketch may be completed with as many useful details as can be given, and a comparison effected between the present system and systems in use in the past, not in the nature of a criticism but rather as a statement of differences and resemblances—for the student is not yet prepared for critical examination. With such study will go hand in hand a more detailed study of Indian history, and we must then endeavour to give a careful survey of British history especially from the point of view of the growth of Parliament¹ and of the influence of the Reform movement both in Europe and in England, examining in detail the causes leading to the English Civil War and to the American and French Revolutions, ascertaining, in connection with the latter, the reasons for the English opposition to the Revolution and the causes which finally enabled the states of Europe to join in crushing the Napoleonic power.

I should then think it advisable to explain the present political situation in England and to survey

¹ cf. Anson's *Law and Custom of the Constitution*, Carter's *English Legal History* and other similar works suitable for the teacher's reference.

recent British legislation, pursuing the same course with regard to India, and at the same time I should recommend my students to read small works on economics—both Indian and European—and to study a book like that of Dr. Keynes on the scope and method of political economy.

This brings us to what now becomes of much importance—the showing of the theory as it works in practice. Let the student study, for example, the nature of the business as transacted by a Municipal or District Board, let him obtain and read through carefully the Municipal By-laws, and let him from time to time attend court to witness the administration of justice. Let him read the official reports and statements in connection with the current business of the Provincial and Imperial Legislative Councils and let him read two classes of newspapers—that which supports the Government decisions and that which opposes them fairly, and without distortion of motive. And now the time has come for these young men to attend political meetings, even while students of Colleges. Please note that I say *attend* meetings, I do *not* say “to take a prominent part in organising and carrying out overt acts of political agitation”. As regards this I am in full agreement with the “Risley Circular” which created so much feeling a short while ago. School students, says the circular, may not attend political meetings, and I think that this is a prohibition as much in the interests of the students

themselves as in the interests of public peace. But College students "may reasonably claim some wider liberty of action than is permitted to schoolboys," and attendance at public meetings, as distinguished from taking an active part in them, is therefore allowed.

I think it extremely desirable that College students—at any rate those who are training themselves to understand political questions—should attend such meetings to hear the views of well-known responsible public men of all parties and to weigh them as far as they are capable. Some of the Professors of the College should also attend such meetings and afterwards—as a matter of principle—criticise to the students the views of the lecturers whatever they may be, so as to endeavour to show that there are always two sides to every political question agitating the minds of the public. Side by side with this, to make such a system as the above complete, it is highly important that the student should be given opportunities of understanding practically the nature of Government and its responsibilities. As an American Professor has said: "A true political education is not a study of facts about civil Government. A man may possess vast knowledge with regard to the workings of our social and political machinery, and yet be absolutely untrained in those things which make a good citizen." And there are two stages in the performance of this part of our task, first the placing before the student the great ideals, the striving

after which has made some nations great and the loss of which has caused their downfall, ideals for which great men have struggled and suffered in the past, and second the making of the School or College a place in which practical experiments may be tried, in which the students may be given adequate opportunities of learning how to govern themselves so that they may be the more fitted to govern others when such time comes. The adoption in the School of a Prefectorial system on the lines of that introduced by Dr. Arnold of Rugby, and of Debating Societies in which rules of procedure are carefully studied and followed, are means whereby the students may be saddled with a certain amount of the responsibility of power; as well as the institution in the College of what are called "mock" parliaments and "mock" trials and of associations connected with athletics and other occupations. In this way the student will begin to understand the necessity for law and order, the great responsibility of governing, the liability to error even though intentions may be of the best, and the mischief of inexperience. He will also be subject to the criticism and perhaps hostility of his fellow-students and will learn to bear them patiently. He will suffer acutely because his motives have been misunderstood and misconstrued, and he will see his fondly-cherished schemes swept away under the ridicule or disapproval of his comrades. In course of time he will begin to understand from his own small and insignificant

experience the stupendous difficulties which must inevitably be in the path of those responsible for the government of a great country, he will learn how necessary it is to think before he speaks, to study before he presumes to criticise, and to weigh beforehand the probable results of any action he may think it desirable to take.

If our Indian students are trained somewhat on the lines sketched roughly above, then I believe that Schools and Colleges will be rendering valuable service to the nation that is to be. Young men will take their part in the life of the world with a certain amount both of theoretical and of practical knowledge ready for use in their relations with the many acute problems which in these days beset the would-be reformer in India. Now is the time for such students—presuming that their College career is ended—to begin to mix in public life, provided that circumstances and surroundings permit. I feel strongly that every young Indian ought to make a point of taking part in some branch of public life. At present the people as a whole—from want of the true kind of education—are far too apathetic even as regards the welfare of the town to which they belong, to say nothing of the larger interests of the province or of the country as a whole. In my own experience as a member of the Benares Municipal Board I find that very few of the constituents (if the term may be used) of the ward I represent

regard me as anything more than a machine which has the sole function of being put into activity to further personal and private requirements. All this has to be changed, but the change is to be effected by a systematic course of education and can be accomplished, I venture to assert, in no other way. Let the elders among us to-day do what lies in our power to press for such reforms as we may think desirable, let us indulge in such political activity as may best suit our purpose, and we shall only be fulfilling our bare duty as citizens of our country. But let us beware of sharing our burden with the young men of the coming generation until they have grown strong enough to bear it by study and experience. We of the present generation have two duties: first, to do all that lies in our power to promote the welfare of our native land, second, to prepare our successors for a similar task, when their time comes to take it up and when we, grown old and weak, are no longer fit for the work, are no longer in touch with the progress which we have been to a small extent instrumental in bringing about. To each generation is the country given in trust that it may pour out its life's service in the cause of progress and of brotherhood, and heavy will be its responsibility if it shrink from the task and shelter itself behind the youthful enthusiasm of those whose turn has not yet come. Sad indeed will be the effect on the coming nation if political

activity is permitted to those whose want of balance makes the result of their activity or their line of action uncertain and not to be foreseen. Above all should the political orator take heed lest the power of his oratory so excite the undisciplined minds of the youths who may be in his audience as to lead them to do that which he would himself, perhaps, be the last to approve and the first to condemn. The law of the land may be constrained to punish those who may have been the immediate cause of disturbance or of harm, yet there is a Law above the law of the land which will judge *him* guilty who incites to harm and will exact from him the uttermost penalty ; and one the agents of this great Law is the remorse of his own conscience.

When the coming generation has reached manhood and has striven to fit itself for the work which lies before it, then, for some time, will the two generations be working together, the older gradually resigning its functions in favour of the younger, and contenting itself with advice and words of caution. Finally the older generation lays aside its burden and makes way for those whose duty it now is to take up the trust in its entirety. Fanciful and unpractical as this may sound, I believe it to be the ideal towards the attainment of which we should turn our minds and activity. At any rate, I for one shall do all in my power to prevent those committed to my charge from taking a practical share in the political life of this

country until they are ready to enter it, for not only do I know the evil which will result if they are allowed prematurely to involve themselves in the excitement of political agitation, but *I dare not* lead them directly or indirectly into difficulties from the consequences of which I am powerless to protect them.

A few final words as to the position of the teacher. It cannot be denied that he occupies a very difficult position and, unless a reaction against present methods sets in, his position will become increasingly difficult as time goes on. He himself, of course, has his own political opinions and has a perfect right to take part in political meetings, so long as he keeps this side of his life well apart from his life in the school, but in these times of strong feeling this is not so easy as it looks. So far as the lower school is concerned the position is, perhaps, comparatively easy, for no teacher worthy of the name would venture to unsettle the minds of his young pupils by forcibly turning their attention to that which has as yet no natural place in their thoughts. It is only in the two highest classes that the difficulty begins at all, for then the student for the first time begins to come in contact with the life of the world outside, and it is for this reason that I have suggested above that in these classes the preparation for political life should be started. But when we come to the College Department, the task of the Professor is indeed hard. The young man is beginning

to feel that desire for political activity which, if rightly trained, is the basis and forerunner of those qualities which will make the patriot and statesman of the future. It is here that the necessity for impartiality becomes imperative, and yet most difficult to display. The parents themselves, for the most part, seem to pay but little attention to the political views of their sons, or may even be so carried away by their own political opinions as to look with indifference or even approval upon the entry of the younger members of their family into the political arena; while the young men themselves—fired with the enthusiasm of youth—will regard as unsympathetic the Professor who avoids the temptation of expressing determined views along the lines of their own personal inclinations. It is all very well to say that the Professor must rise superior to these considerations; no doubt he must, but it should not be forgotten at the same time that if the Professor is to have that influence over the students which is essential for their well-being, he must acquire their confidence and affection—and in these days confidence is to some extent dependent on similarity of views. I believe, however, that this is a passing phase—I earnestly trust that it is—and that in the long run the generous mind of the young man will instinctively respect the Professor or teacher who endeavours to follow the path of his duty towards his pupils even though it may clash with their desires or with their

own conception of unselfish patriotism. It seems to me, moreover, that if the course of historical and political training which has been outlined in the preceding pages is intelligently followed, the mind of the student will have become more or less impressed both with the serious and responsible nature of political life and with that knowledge which is a *sine qua non* of the intelligent exercise of political functions; and by acquaintance with the problems of school-politics he will be in a position to realise the difficulties, dangers and pitfalls of the larger politics of the outside world. The task of the teacher is to act as a guide to the student in his study, not to provide him with second-hand opinions, nor even to suggest to him the acceptance of any conclusions although they may possess the sanction of acceptance by those who are qualified to judge. We must keep before us the ideal of truth as far as it can be ascertained, we must impress upon the student the importance of realising that *facts* which he learns are in reality only so many data from which conclusions may be drawn more or less helpful to the understanding of present conditions and of the line of action which may be most conducive to improvement, and we must not forget to show him that even among those most earnest for their country's welfare, opinions may materially differ as to the best course to be adopted. Formed in different moulds we look upon facts from different standpoints, and, in consequence,

our conclusions differ as well as our estimate of the relative importance of the various facts in history with reference to the present day. But we must have one common principle and that is unselfish sincerity of motive ; with it, there is hope for our country's future, while without it we are doomed to destruction.

And if we claim that those around us shall believe in our sincerity, shall not question the honesty of our intentions, we must, in our turn, extend the same charity to others whom we see to be working along their own lines towards what I firmly believe is a common goal. We may and we have the *duty* to question their methods ; and in so far as those methods seem, to us, subversive of the interests of the country and of its peace and harmony, its law and order, by all means let us denounce those methods and work against them to the extent of our ability, but even then we may credit the individual with honesty, sincerity and patriotism, however misunderstood.

It is for the student by study, thought, and judgment to understand what really underlies the service of the Motherland.